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Reflection on Postmodern Nomadism in French Science Fiction Games (1987–1992)

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As it is known, the products of popular culture reflect the contemporaneity of everyday life in “a particular culture that entangles meaning, materiality and social practice”¹. Film, television, digital games, and other types of mass media are rooted in their respective cultures, simultaneously shaping and reproducing users’ views on social practices, as well as on political and socioeconomic processes ruling in societies. Moreover, it is sometimes the case that popular culture becomes a language for articulating the hopes and fears of society. As regards films and television, this case was thoroughly examined by numerous researchers, especially regarding ideology articulated within particular genres². Furthermore, digital games are not free from socioeconomic conditions which constitute them, and some publications devote specific attention to their connections with neoliberalism and capitalism³.

What often binds digital games with genre studies is the popular convention used by this type of media. Science fiction, defined as literary fiction featuring subjects or themes such as “spaceships, interplanetary or interstellar travel; aliens and the encounter with aliens; [...] time travel; [and] futuristic utopias and dystopias”⁴, does not necessarily mean pure escapism. Moreover, as Donald M. Hassler and Clyde Wilcox

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- 1 Storey, John. “Culture: The ‘Popular’ and the ‘Material.’” *Materiality and Popular Culture: The Popular Life of Things*. Ed. Anna Malinowska and Karolina Lebek. New York and London: Routledge, 2017, p. 18.
 - 2 See for example Turner, Graeme. *Film as Social Practice*. London and New York: Routledge, 1999; Neale, Steve. *Genre and Hollywood*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 208–217; Altman, Rick. *Film/Genre*. London: British Film Institute, 1999, p. 94.
 - 3 Dyer-Witheford, Nick and Greig De Peuter. *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.
 - 4 Roberts, Adam. *Science Fiction: Second Edition*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 12.

state, “[t]he best science fiction frequently includes a sophisticated depiction of political interactions”⁵.

This article examines an extraordinary example of using science fiction iconography in digital games to expose preoccupations with the future state of the particular country. As the time of analysis, the period between 1987 and 1992 was chosen, which marked a significant emergence of French games commenting on the mentality of contemporary citizens within the science fiction convention. It is worth mentioning here that France, contrary to the United States and the United Kingdom, had not been specialized in science fiction games, and French programmers had a stronger predilection to use contemporary or historical settings for their computerized works⁶. The literary science fiction in France, once having held a high position in the 1970s, in the 1980s was also in crisis⁷, and in the same year 1987 the most significant avant-garde SF comic book magazine, *Métal Hurlant*, was closed. Despite unfavorable conditions for the development of science fiction in France, however, this literary convention became present in French digital games. This article aims to prove that French science fiction games notably expressed the general condition of the domestic society in an era dominated by progressive globalization and reappearing nomadic lifestyles. For the following analysis four games popular at the time – *Captain Blood*⁸, *Les voyageurs du temps*⁹, *Another World*¹⁰, and *Flashback*¹¹ – were chosen. All of them resonated with gaming communities, with *Flashback* achieving the most spectacular international success¹². Thus, they could represent the spirit of the players of that time. The analysis presented here will necessarily be limited, textual and include the following fragments of the games, marked with brackets:

- beginning sequences [B];
- ending sequences [E];
- the suggested material situation of the protagonists [MS];
- kernels, significant events affecting this situation [K];

5 Hassler, Donald M. and Clyde Wilcox. “Introduction.” *Political Science Fiction*. Ed. Donald M. Hassler and Clyde Wilcox. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1997, p. 1.

6 Donovan, Tristan. *Replay: The History of Video Games*. Lewes: Yellow Ant, 2010, p. 128.

7 Lanuque, Jean-Guillaume. “La Science-Fiction Française Face Au «Grand Cauchemar Des Années 1980» : Une Lecture Politique, 1981–1993.” *ReS Futurae* 3.3 (2012): n. pag. Web. 17 Oct. 2017.

8 Ulrich, Philippe, Didier Bouchon, and Jean-Michel Jarre. *Captain Blood*. Vers. Atari ST. Paris: ERE Informatique, 1987. Computer software.

9 Cuisset, Paul, and Eric Chahi. *Les Voyageurs Du Temps: Le Menace*. Vers. Amiga. Paris: Delphine Software International, 1989. Computer software.

10 Chahi, Eric. *Another World*. Vers. Amiga. Paris: Delphine Software International, 1991. Computer software.

11 Cuisset, Paul. *Flashback*. Vers. Amiga. Paris: Delphine Software International, 1992. Computer software.

12 Blanchet, Alexis. “France.” *Video Games Around the World*. Ed. Mark J. P. Wolf, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015, pp. 182–183.

- implied style of gameplay [S].

Then these games will be placed in the context of postmodern and existential philosophies, as expressing the atmosphere dominating in French society of the 1980s and 1990s.

The Sociopolitical Background

In 1981, the parliamentary elections in France were won by left-wing Socialist Party; its leader, François Mitterrand, was subsequently elected the President. Having gained the confidence of the people, Mitterrand enacted several economic reforms which aimed at the reinstitution of welfare state and strengthening the position of public institutions. However, the nationalization of banks and enterprises, along with increased expenditure on pensions and benefits, did not lead to increased economic growth. In 1983, the country encountered a crisis, resulting in reduced expenses and the resignation of Pierre Mauroy, the first Prime Minister after Mitterrand presidency, a year later¹³. Although Mitterrand stayed in office, the 1986 parliamentary elections resulted in removing Socialists from power and conservative measures adopted by neo-Gaullists, with Jacques Chirac becoming the Prime Minister. The following cohabitation between two opposing centers of power resulted in political instability and undermined public confidence in the state, as previously nationalized public enterprises were being sold again, even despite the presidential resistance.

The bleak economic situation of France influenced public atmosphere and feeling of unhappiness. With the country sailing towards neoliberalism, there was a significant change in the experiences of both the May 1968 generation and the 'génération Mitterrand.' As Luc Boltanski and Éve Chiapello claim, while the decade 1968–1978 marked high trade unionism, stable jobs, and ubiquitous interest with social class, during the analogous decade 1985–1995 trade unions became weaker, and the position of workers worsened¹⁴. Ultraliberal turns occurring in Thatcherian Great Britain, and the Reaganian United States were visible in France as well, leading to desperate measures. Not coincidentally, the 1986 suicide rate in France reached 24.2 per 100000 persons, the highest level documented in the history of the country¹⁵.

¹³ See Cole, Alistair. "French Socialists in Office: Lessons from Mitterrand and Jospin." *Modern & Contemporary France* 7.1 (1999), pp. 73–77.

¹⁴ Boltanski, Luc and Éve Chiapello. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Trans. Gregory Elliott. London and New York: Verso, 2007, pp. 167–168; See also W. Rand Smith. *Crisis in the French Labour Movement: A Grassroots' Perspective*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1987.

¹⁵ Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. "Suicide Rates." OECD: Paris, 2017. Web. 10 Oct. 2017.

Such depressing stagnation of France coincided with an ongoing global tendency to reinstate nomadic style of life. Zygmunt Bauman writes in his book *Liquid Modernity* that contemporary modernity brought the domination of mobile over the settled. “[T]he settled majority is ruled by the nomadic and exterritorial elite”¹⁶, which means that success, just like in the premodern era, became again a domain of people who can move instantly from one country to another. To survive, the generation of the liquid modernity must be mobile, the truth well known from such films as *Up in the Air*¹⁷. Thus nomadism, romanticized by Western philosophers and writers glorifying its supposed freedom of choice¹⁸, according to Bauman became more of the coercion. Neoliberalism brought higher freedom of expressing individuality, but along with freedom came uncertainty: “responsibility resting on one’s own shoulders” portends a paralyzing fear of risk and failure without the right to appeal and seek redress.”¹⁹ Nan Ellin notes that while confronting with such fears, postmodern individuals responded with “retribalization, nostalgia, escapism, and spiritual (re)born.”²⁰ Escapism, here considered as withdrawal from participating in monotonous social life, became a landmark of the playable characters in French science fiction games.

Living in the Shadow of Postmodernity

The beginning sequences of the analyzed French science fiction games, while explaining the initial situation of the playable characters, characterize severe conditions of living in postmodern society. As Michelle Rodino-Colocino reminds, the 1980s marked the high popularity of computing, as well as the emergence of the ‘geek’ culture composed of white male adolescents with knowledge about computers²¹. The protagonists of two titles, *Captain Blood*’s Bob Morlock and *Another World*’s Lester Chaykin, are depicted as programmers who built their alternate worlds. As the player can learn from the *Captain Blood* manual, Morlock is a Parisian who becomes trapped in his program and duplicated several times within his alternate universe. Of course, this is not yet the actual game, but the background for the character is not revealed further in the game. However, the intro of *Captain Blood* depicts an illustration of

16 Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001, p. 13.

17 *Up in the Air*. Dir. Jason Reitman. Perf. George Clooney, Vera Farmiga. Paramount Pictures, 2012.

18 This topic is thoroughly discussed by Peters, John Durham. “Exile, Nomadism, and Diaspora.” *Visual Culture: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*. Ed. Joanne Morra and Marquard Smith. London and New York: Routledge, 2006, pp. 141–160.

19 Bauman, Zygmunt, op. cit., p. 19.

20 Ellin, Nan. “Shelter From the Storm, or: Form Follows Fear and Vice Versa.” *Architecture of Fear*. Ed. Nan Ellin. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997, p. 26.

21 Rodino-Colocino, Michelle. “Geek Jeremiads: Speaking the Crisis of Job Loss by Opposing Offshored and H-1B Labor.” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 9.1 (2012), p. 29.

multiplied fetus skeletons, strongly inspired by the works of Swiss surrealist painter H. R. Giger, which connotes the multiplication of the hero [B]. In turn, a cinematic intro informs the player about the background for Chaykin's situation, and during the beginning sequence, one can see him working on a scientific project, totally separated from other beings. Chaykin dwells in a bunker surrounded by barbed wire, and the name of operating system used by him – "Peanut" – emphasizes the isolation of the hero [B]. However, Chaykin's hermit lifestyle is interrupted when electromagnetic discharges, disrupting his experiment, transfer him to an alternate reality populated by aliens [K]. Apart from these two titles, which use clear self-referential threads²², there are also two games featuring the same type of a broke, precarious protagonist. The anonymous hero of *Les Voyageurs du temps*, whose name is not even known, works as a window cleaner doing his tedious job on a skyscraper, while its owner insults him from the top [B]. However, during the progress of the game, the player can discover a time machine, which sends the hero to a different, medieval reality; there the protagonist learns that the Earth will be attacked in the distant future by aliens, and joins the resistance [K]. Finally, the protagonist of *Flashback*, Conrad Hart, wakes in the middle of a jungle, far away from his homeland planet occupied by an alien race [B]. He neither remembers his identity nor has the money required for the return trip, and the only possibility to gather the funds is the participation in a reality show relying on killing other contestants [K].

As we can see, the motivation for the player is built upon several features absent in the player characters' situation [MS]. They are inauthentic (*Captain Blood*), lonely (*Another World*), occupy lower social positions (*Les Voyageurs du temps*) or do not know the past (*Flashback*). During the 1980s and 1990s, these values could be attributed to the postmodernity. First of all, according to Guy M. Thompson, the postmodern condition rejected the Heideggerian notion of authenticity, the capability of "accepting the anxiety and hardship that our everyday existence entails."²³ Martin Heidegger, attributed traditionally to "solid" modernity, among the contemporary habits of humanity, indicated living inauthentically – which means that people do not consider the possibility of their death in the future, are displaced from the world and fall into alienation²⁴. Nonetheless, postmodern generations forgot about such admonitions,

22 The creator of *Another World*, Éric Chahi, confirmed that Chaykin is the *alter ego* of himself. See Ichbiah, Daniel. *Eric Chahi: parcours d'un créateur de jeux vidéo français*. Cergy: Ed. Pix'n Love, 2013, p. 114.

23 Thompson, Guy M. "Postmodernism and Psychoanalysis: A Heideggerian Critique of Postmodernist Malaise and the Question of Authenticity." *Way Beyond Freud: Postmodern Psychoanalysis*. Ed. Joseph Reppen, Jane Tucker, and Martin A. Schulman. London: Open Gate Press, 2004, p. 186.

24 Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*. Trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962, pp. 222–223.

celebrating inauthenticity as such²⁵. The careful reflection about the past was replaced by “living the moment to the full,”²⁶ without looking forward to the future. Nonetheless, the future has been out of sight due to postmodern thinking about social issues. According to Peter Taylor-Gobby, the supporters of postmodern thought such as Jacques Lyotard ignored the issue of increasing social inequalities caused by neoliberalism²⁷. When the boss scorns the player character at the beginning of *Les Voyageurs du temps*, the simple frame composition reveals the economic difference between the “top” and the “bottom” of the social ladder [B].

An Illusion of Happy End

To these factors forming the postmodern condition – inauthenticity, alienation, living the moment, and poverty – one can also add detachment from the homeland. The science fiction convention includes time and (especially) space travel, and thus constant movement. In the times of increasing social mobility, this convention seemed to accurately express the condition of modern society, whose rhizomic structure condemns individuals to be rooted out and drifting²⁸. This state of rootlessness is visible in French science fiction games, whose heroes have to be always in motion. For example, the gameplay of *Captain Blood* is limited in time. As time goes by, the protagonist diminishes, slowly losing his life in favor of his clones, which he must destroy to survive. Without knowledge about the coordinates, the player has to travel from one planet to another, receiving the data suitable for discovering the locations of the clones [S]. Therefore, the gameplay of *Captain Blood* requires constant wandering from the player, which demonstrates the nomadic lifestyle, with the continuous fight for the protagonist’s authenticity in a world where “we are no longer ourselves.”²⁹

Flashback’s gameplay does also include a sequence based on constant moving in the world. The city of New Washington, where the critical part of the game begins, is divided into four sectors symbolically named after four terrestrial continents: America, Africa, Asia, and Europe. The player transports himself or herself by train, performing tasks on all the ‘continents’ [S]. One can realize that the New Washington is a symbolic *ecumenopolis*, to dwell in which means to move consistently. Visiting a city is like visiting the whole world; instead of becoming a “global village,” the Earth

25 Thompson, Guy M., op. cit.

26 Bauman, Zygmunt. *Consuming Life*. Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2007, p. 105.

27 Taylor-Gobby, Peter. “Postmodernism and Social Policy: A Great Leap Backwards?” *Journal of Social Policy* 23.3 (1994), pp. 385–404.

28 Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005 [1987], pp. 1–25.

29 Ibidem, p. 5.

turned into the “global city.”³⁰ The uncontrolled development of the cities in such games as *Flashback* and *Les Voyageurs du temps* seems to result only in huge Molochs.

In contrast to *Captain Blood*'s rhizomic structure, *Another World* appears to be more linear, but here the player also is obliged to instant action. After Lester being materialized in an alternative world, the gameworld forces the player character to continuous escape from danger. If Lester stops for a moment in front of the pool, he will be captured by an octopus. If, after he has escaped from the cage into which the aliens put him, he stops only for a moment, he will be shot dead by a guard who appears from nowhere. Consequently, apart from shooting aliens in the act of defense, the player character must almost perpetually “run forward” [S]. In J. Glenn Gray's interpretation of Heidegger, “running forward” equates with experiencing “not yet,” the future, seen as “a realm of present possibility.”³¹ The player's actions in *Another World*, while taking place in the futuristic world, are then directed to survive in the present: the present postmodern world.

The latter example shows us that the French science fiction games from the 1987–1992 period, while containing the iconography specific to a given genre, are suspended in the present – as well as the protagonists. These games conclude themselves with similar, illusory happy ends [E]. For example, *Another World*'s Lester finds a native, who becomes his ally and friend. *Captain Blood*'s Bob Morlock destroys all his clones and seduces an anthropomorphic female. The anonymous protagonist of *Les voyageurs du temps* saves the futuristic Paris from alien invaders and gains the respect he desired. Finally, *Flashback*'s Conrad Hart recovers his memory. These endings, however, have a hidden agenda since the main problem with which the players fought – rootlessness – was not resolved. At the end of *Another World*, Lester saves his life but loses consciousness, and his friend flies away with him, sitting on the dragon. They float toward the blue eternity, staying in the state of nomadic limbo. In turn, Hart after destroying the headquarters of aliens realizes that his spaceship will never locate his homeland planet, and hibernates himself to float in the black eternity. Similarly, the *Captain Blood* and *Les Voyageurs du temps* protagonists remain in the alternate worlds, never returning to contemporary Paris. The player has to leave his or her characters in the liminal state, from which there is no return.

Conclusion: Reflection and Post-Reflection

French game developers during the 1987–1992 period had a right intuition about what was supposed to happen not only to France but also to all developed countries at the

30 Afshar, Farokh. “Balancing Global City with Global Village.” *Habitat International* 22.4 (1998), pp. 375–387.

31 Gray, J. Glenn. “The Idea of Death in Existentialism.” *The Journal of Philosophy* 48.5 (1951), p. 123.

time of increasing globalization and the triumph of postmodernism with its neo-liberal demands. Mitterrand's governments did not prevent a global trend towards dismantling the "welfare state." In 1993, the Socialists failed to win parliamentary elections, which paved the way for the right-wing parties to continue reprivatizing state-owned enterprises and to adopt the French economy to the needs of the free market. At the same time, the preservation of privileges for administrative staff and experienced employees placed the French economy in a liminal state – no longer social, but not yet libertarian. Timothy B. Smith's statement that "France is in crisis"³² would correspond with the discussed period. However, after the defeat of the Socialists, both gaming and literary science fiction in France slowly homed in for the Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" paradigm³³. As neoliberalism became more deeply rooted in the French economy, game developers were less willing to focus on its negative results. When the majority of examined games (*Captain Blood*, *Another World*, *Flashback*) were followed by their respective sequels (*Commander Blood*³⁴, *Heart of the Alien*³⁵, *Fade in Black*³⁶), the issues of postmodern condition were not as highlighted as in the original games. Only nomadic lifestyle was still an object of admiration. The ending sequence of *Fade to Black*, concludes the player's actions with such words: "Your courage has given back to our race the very essence of its being: freedom."³⁷ Instead of stimulating reflection with dark visions of the future, French science fiction game developers began to console him or her with hope for a better tomorrow, hope to find himself or herself in neoliberal France.

32 Smith, Timothy B. *France in Crisis: Welfare, Inequality, and Globalization since 1980*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

33 Bréan, Simon. "Histoires Du Futur et Fin de l'Histoire Dans La Science-Fiction Française Des Années 1990." *ReS Futurae* 3 (2012): n. pag. Web. 17 Oct. 2017.

34 Ulrich, Philippe, and Didier Bouchon. *Commander Blood*. Vers. Windows. Paris: Cryo, 1995. Computer software.

35 Barnes, Jeremy M. *Heart of the Alien*. Vers. Sega CD. Los Angeles, CA: Interplay Entertainment, 1994. Computer software.

36 Cuisset, Paul. *Fade to Black*. Vers. PlayStation. Paris: Delphine Software International, 1995. Computer software.

37 Ibidem.

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Summary

The science fiction genre convention is typically used to articulate fears and hopes of contemporary society. This article aims to prove that between the 1980s and 1990s, this genre was used for the first time in French digital games to describe the situation of contemporary society allegorically. Making use of postmodern and existentialist philosophy, the author argues that the heroes of four examined games personify the consequences of French transformation from the “welfare state” to free market – inauthenticity, loneliness, living the moment, and poverty. These factors result in the nomadic (as considered by Zygmunt Bauman) lifestyle of the games’ protagonists. Consequently, the analyzed games offer an insight into the economic and social changes in France.